

Baltic Juggernaut

A Defiant Lithuania Leads Soviet States In Drive to Break Free

**Gorbachev's Plea for Caution,
Promise of More Freedom
Fail to Deter Secessionists**

Could the U.S.S.R. Unravel?

By PETER GUMBEL

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VILNIUS, U.S.S.R.—Fifty years after Stalin grabbed the tiny Baltic republics of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia under a secret agreement with Hitler, Lithuania is now leading its neighbors in a breathtaking dash for independence. Moscow might find ways to slow the process, but there seems little it can do to stop it. Unless the entire structure of the Soviet Union is radically altered to give its 15 constituent republics full control over their own affairs, Lithuania will be out the door.

During a three-day visit that ended Saturday, Mikhail Gorbachev pleaded with Lithuanians to reconsider their plans to secede. But the republic is stubbornly moving ahead. Its leading lawyers are busy writing a new constitution that would turn Lithuania into a Western-style democracy. Its top economists are drafting dozens of laws aimed at installing a free-market system as soon as possible. Independence fever has even spread to the military: Some of Lithuania's retired brass have already selected the commander-in-chief of the new army and more than 20 of its would-be generals.

Dangers of Secession

"After Romania, Lithuania is next in line," promises Kazimiras Antanavicius, a leading economics professor and independence activist. Emboldened by the loosening of the Soviet Union's grip over Eastern Europe, the local Communist Party recently broke with Moscow.

For Mr. Gorbachev, already facing a dangerous backlash in the Soviet Communist Party and a rapidly deteriorating economy, the Baltic push for freedom has emerged as the most immediate and difficult challenge to his rule. While agreeing to let Eastern Europe go its own way, he is strongly opposed to Soviet republics doing the same. If Lithuania continues hurtling along its present path to secession, there is a considerable risk that the entire Soviet Union might unravel, perhaps unseating Mr. Gorbachev. For want of any solutions, he is now frantically playing for time.

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Lithuania's defiance has already caught on elsewhere outside the Baltic region. Activists in Moldavia are pushing for their republic to be returned to neighboring Romania; it too became part of the Soviet Union under the pact between Hitler and Stalin. Further south in Azerbaijan, violent clashes have erupted as nationalists have sought to open the border to Iran. The Soviet media yesterday reported that at least 25 people, mostly Armenians, had been killed in ethnic clashes in the Azerbaijan capital of Baku.

A Rebellious KGB

The Kremlin seems at a loss as to how to deal with Lithuania. Soviet officials insist privately that Moscow won't use military force, knowing this would bring the policy of perestroika, or restructuring, to a screeching halt and wreck Mr. Gorbachev's international credibility as a progressive man of peace.

Moscow can no longer count on traditional Soviet methods of political control, either. Even the republic's KGB secret police, which for years tormented anyone suspected of harboring nationalist tendencies, has turned rebellious: 38 KGB officers recently signed a letter to the Tiesa newspaper stating their support for the Lithuanian party's break with Moscow.

Faced with a seemingly unstoppable force, Mr. Gorbachev has resorted to delaying tactics. On the one hand, he is pleading with the Lithuanian rebels to hold back. He has promised a fundamental change in the federal structure of the Soviet Union that would give the republics a large degree of autonomy, perhaps transforming the old Soviet empire into a new commonwealth of independent states. At the same time, he is attempting to stall Lithuanian secession by throwing as many legal obstacles in its path as he can find.

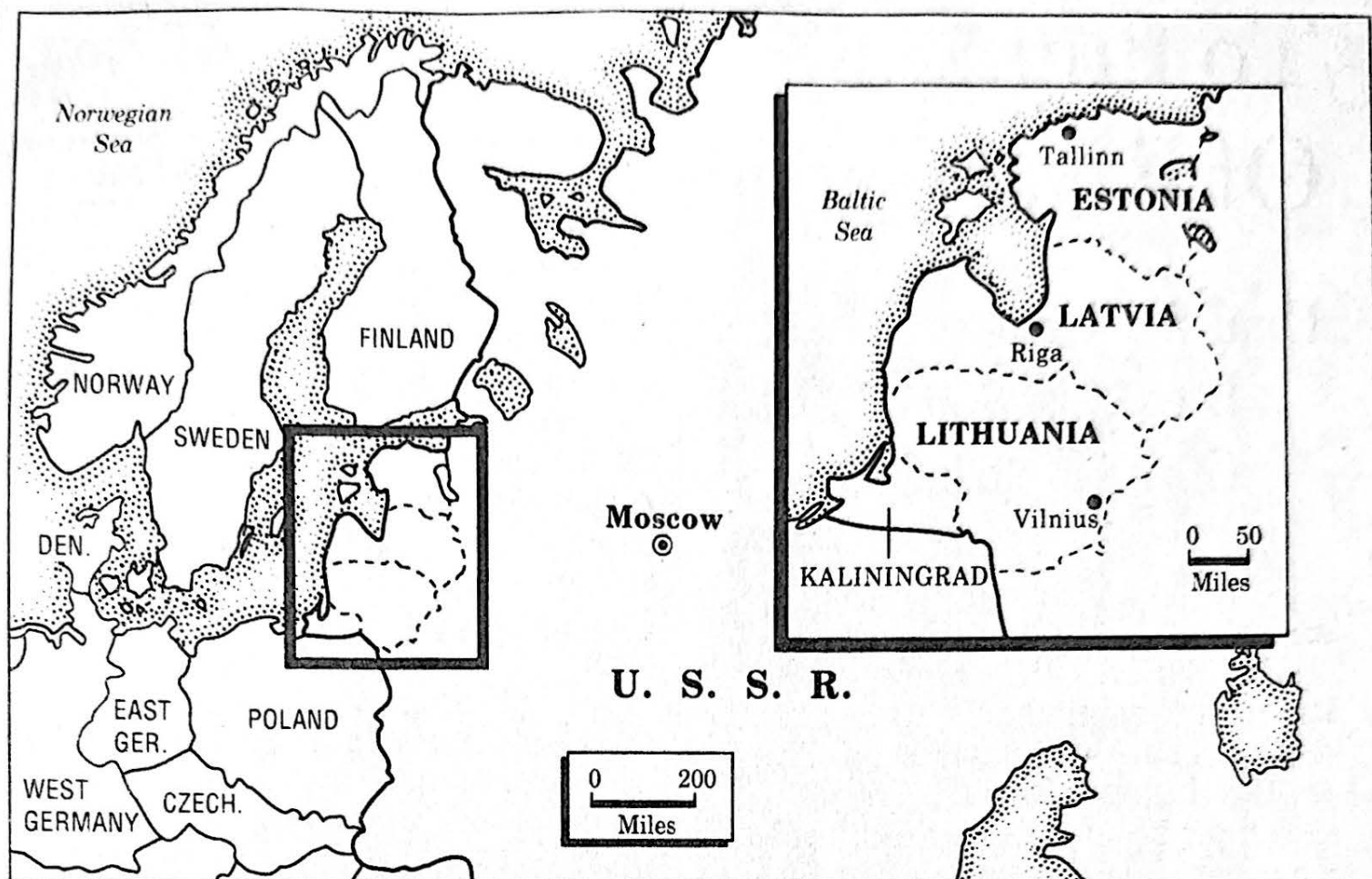
Legal Maneuvers

During his visit, he disclosed that the government is drafting a law to regulate, and presumably complicate, the procedure for secession—a tacit admission that Moscow no longer considers the idea unthinkable. "You must think a thousand times before setting sail without a compass, without maps, fuel and without a crew," Mr. Gorbachev fumed at a tense four-hour meeting with Communist Party officials here on Saturday.

The Lithuanians are unmoved by this. Vytautas Landsbergis, head of the "Sąjudis" nationalist movement which has become the unofficial policy-making body in the republic, dismisses the new law on secession as a "propaganda trap." He says that it would interfere with Soviet constitutional guarantees of the rights of each republic, including the right to secede.

The idea of a completely new Soviet

The Baltic States, the USSR's Latest Challenge



Lithuania

The largest (25,200 square miles) and most populous (3.6 million people) of the Baltic states is also leading the movement for independence. Ethnic Lithuanians comprise about 80% of its population, with ethnic Russians accounting for another 10%. Agriculture is still very important to its economy and Lithuania possesses a wide range of mineral and energy resources. Its main industries are food processing and textiles and apparel.

Latvia

The most industrialized of all the Soviet republics, Latvia has a population of about 2.5 million people — of which almost 30% are ethnic Russians — living within its 24,600 square miles. Its economy is dominated by such manufacturing industries as transportation equipment, consumer durables and electronic instruments. Fishing is a significant part of the economy; Latvia accounts for about 6% of the Soviet fish catch.

Estonia

Farthest north and the smallest (17,500 square miles) of the republics, Estonia has a population of almost 1.6 million. Ethnic Russians make up a little less than 30% of the population and ethnic Estonians about 64%. Energy and manufacturing are the backbone of the economy.

Baltic Juggernaut: Lithuania Races Forward With its Plans to Secede

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federation of independent states has more appeal, especially among people who have strong doubts about the economic and political viability of a completely separate Lithuanian state. But they have been waiting for about a year for Moscow to come up with its proposals for a new structure, and they are getting impatient. Apart from some recent hints in the Soviet media, there are few signs of any coherent new policy emerging. "We can't readily answer whether we want to be part of it," Deputy Prime Minister Kazimira Prunskiene bluntly told Mr. Gorbachev on Saturday. "We are very skeptical about the idea of a new union whose draft we haven't yet seen."

The roots of the popular uprising in the three Baltic states lie in their proud history and unbroken national identity. Although all were eventually swallowed by Czarist Russia, their destinies for centuries were closely linked to the rest of Europe. They frequently served as a conduit for Western trade with Russia.

The Estonian capital of Tallinn, once known as Reval, boasts a spiky Gothic architecture similar to that of such North German towns as Bremen. Lithuania has strong links to Poland, in part because the two states were united for a period during the Middle Ages. Ethnic Poles still make up about 7% of its population and the republic is predominantly Catholic, unlike Protestant Estonia and Latvia and Orthodox Russia.

Links with other European states have been strongly revived in the past two years, especially following the collapse of Communist rule in Eastern Europe. Next month, some 200 members of new democratic movements in Poland, East Germany and elsewhere will attend a conference here to swap notes on ways to wriggle free of Moscow's control. Algirdas Kaushpedas, a board member of Sajudis, says that the Solidarity movement in Poland, "gave us a political education. We studied and learned from their mistakes, and are careful not to repeat them."

After the turmoil of World War I and the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Baltic states gained their independence from Russia, and kept it for 22 years. Then, in 1940, following a secret agreement with Nazi Germany that the Soviet parliament has just condemned, Stalin forcibly annexed them, deporting thousands of their citizens and ruling with an iron fist. Successive Soviet leaders have tried to keep local nationalist passions in check, partly by sending thousands of Russians and other workers to the three states in an attempt to dilute the local ethnic population.

The irony of the Baltic turmoil is that Mr. Gorbachev enabled and even encouraged it to happen. After he took office in 1985, local activists read his talk of greater "democracy" as a historic opportunity. Over the past 18 months, they have played an increasingly bold game of cat-and-mouse with Moscow.

Baltic activists were the first to organize huge public demonstrations to try to force leaders to adopt more radical policies; almost every other republic has followed suit. With growing self-confidence, the republics one by one reinstated their long-banned national flags and anthems and began demanding autonomy.

Mr. Gorbachev has tried and failed to call them back into line. At the end of 1988, he rallied against a decision by Estonia's leaders to declare the republic "sovereign." But as the Soviet economy has deteriorated, the idea of local sovereignty has gained widespread acceptance. Just a year after Mr. Gorbachev's tirade, the Soviet parliament passed a law that gives the Baltic states wide-ranging freedom to run their economies. Lithuania quickly moved to restrict the goods that visitors to the republic are allowed to buy.

It is perhaps not surprising that the boldest moves toward outright secession have come from Lithuania, whose ethnic population isn't as mixed as that of its Baltic neighbors. Some 80% of its residents are of Lithuanian nationality; less than 10% are Russians. By contrast, Estonians

constitute 65% of Estonia's population, while Latvians make up just over half of their republic. Attempts by Latvian and Estonian nationalists to push for secession have been held back by the strong Russian minorities, who complain bitterly about racial discrimination.

In Lithuania, local authorities have set about erasing many key aspects of Soviet rule, dumping the Communist Party's constitutional monopoly on power and establishing a multi-party system. In the near future, its parliament is expected to pass a bill allowing Lithuanians to opt out of the Red Army and spend their military service working as volunteers in hospitals and elsewhere.

The main thoroughfare in Vilnius, Lenin Avenue, is now named after Gediminas, a 14th century Lithuanian Grand Duke who founded the town. July 21st Street, named after the day in 1940 when the republic was absorbed into the Soviet Union, is now called February 16th Street, the day in 1918 when Lithuania regained its independence from Russia. The local KGB headquarters is on the renamed "Street of Victims."

One of the last bastions of Soviet orthodoxy is the squat Museum of the Revolution. Built 10 years ago to "celebrate" the 40th anniversary of Lithuania's incorporation into the Soviet Union, it blares a familiar message of the achievements of socialism.

But even here, Soviet power is on its last legs. Museum directors recently proposed a new focus on Lithuanian history, in which the years of Soviet occupation are depicted as just one brief—and unpleasant—era. "Everything red is unpopular, and our museum is red," says deputy director Julius Paugis, barely disguising his glee. "The sort of museum we have now has absolutely no future."

Not everyone agrees with such anti-Soviet sentiment. When the Lithuanian Communist Party voted in December to split with Moscow, a small minority of members dissented and set up a pro-Moscow wing. Vladislav Sved, a Russian national who leads the new group, complains that Lithuanians are being pressured by Sajudis to support independence. But even he won't rule out secession. Instead, he says, "We want to obtain maximum sovereignty, but based on the whole federation. We should restructure relations so that secession would be a punishment."

The existence of two Communist Parties is already causing considerable confusion. In some factories, there are now two separate party cells, one pro-Moscow, the other pro-independence. And it is a sign of the topsy-turvy political situation here that Mr. Sved's orthodox wing has no offices, no staff and no newspaper, unlike the independent Communist Party. Mr. Sved and his colleagues aren't even being paid. (That may change once the Kremlin decides which of the two wings to recognize as the official Communist Party.)

Amid the upsurge in excitement, many here acknowledge that the path to independence will be rocky. Few areas need as much urgent attention as the economy. Over the past 50 years, Lithuania has grown totally dependent on the rest of the Soviet Union for suppliers and customers. Even with its new-found economic freedoms, 45% of the republic's industry is still controlled by Moscow. Deputy Prime Minister Prunskiene acknowledges that Lithuania will have to maintain friendly trade ties with the Soviet Union. At the moment its industry produces few products that are readily exportable to the West, and Russia provides the best market for its agricultural produce.

But Western expertise is at hand. Last week, Harvard economist Laurence Summers visited Lithuania at the invitation of Mrs. Prunskiene to give some advice on setting up a market system. The republic's skilled work force and low pay rates enhance its prospects for attracting foreign business, Mr. Summers said. "Transition is always difficult," he added. "There are some firms that won't be viable [in a free-market system], but there are also huge new opportunities."